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(54) **APPARATUS FOR PLACING BATTERY PLATES**

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414/796.7

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See application file for complete search history.

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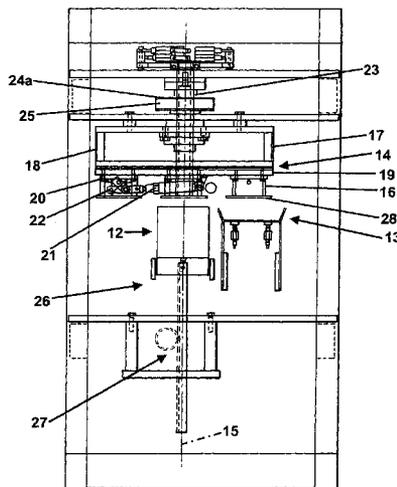
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

This invention relates to apparatus for placing battery plates in a line from a stack of plates including an elevator for receiving a stack of plates and sequentially elevating the stack to maintain, in use, the uppermost plate in the stack in a datum region lying between two parallel generally horizontal planes and a plurality of vacuum heads arranged in a closed loop for sequentially passing over the elevator with a fixed gap from the upper plane of the datum range for picking up the uppermost plate and for subsequently releasing the plate at a release position.

27 Claims, 7 Drawing Sheets



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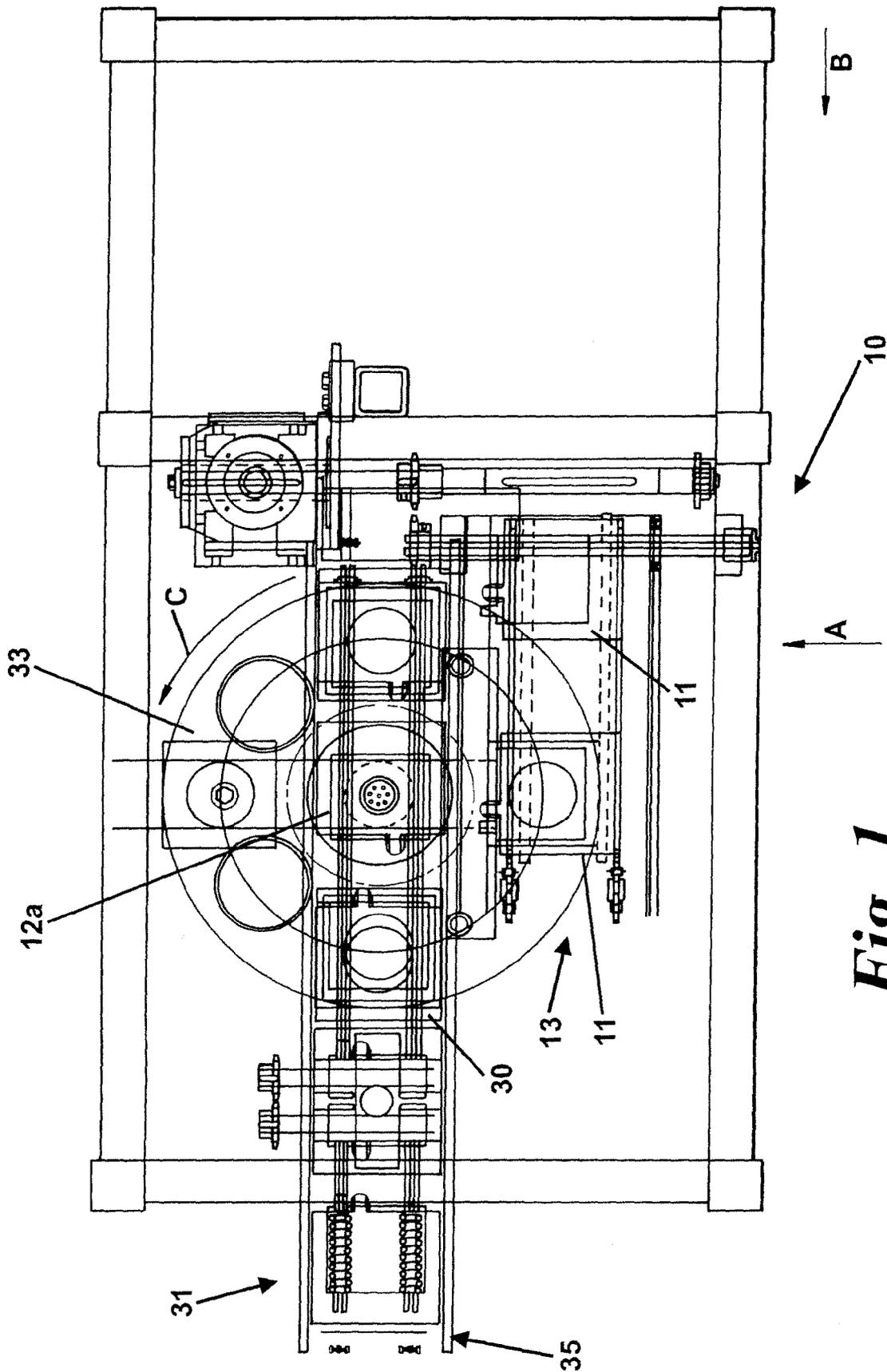


Fig. 1

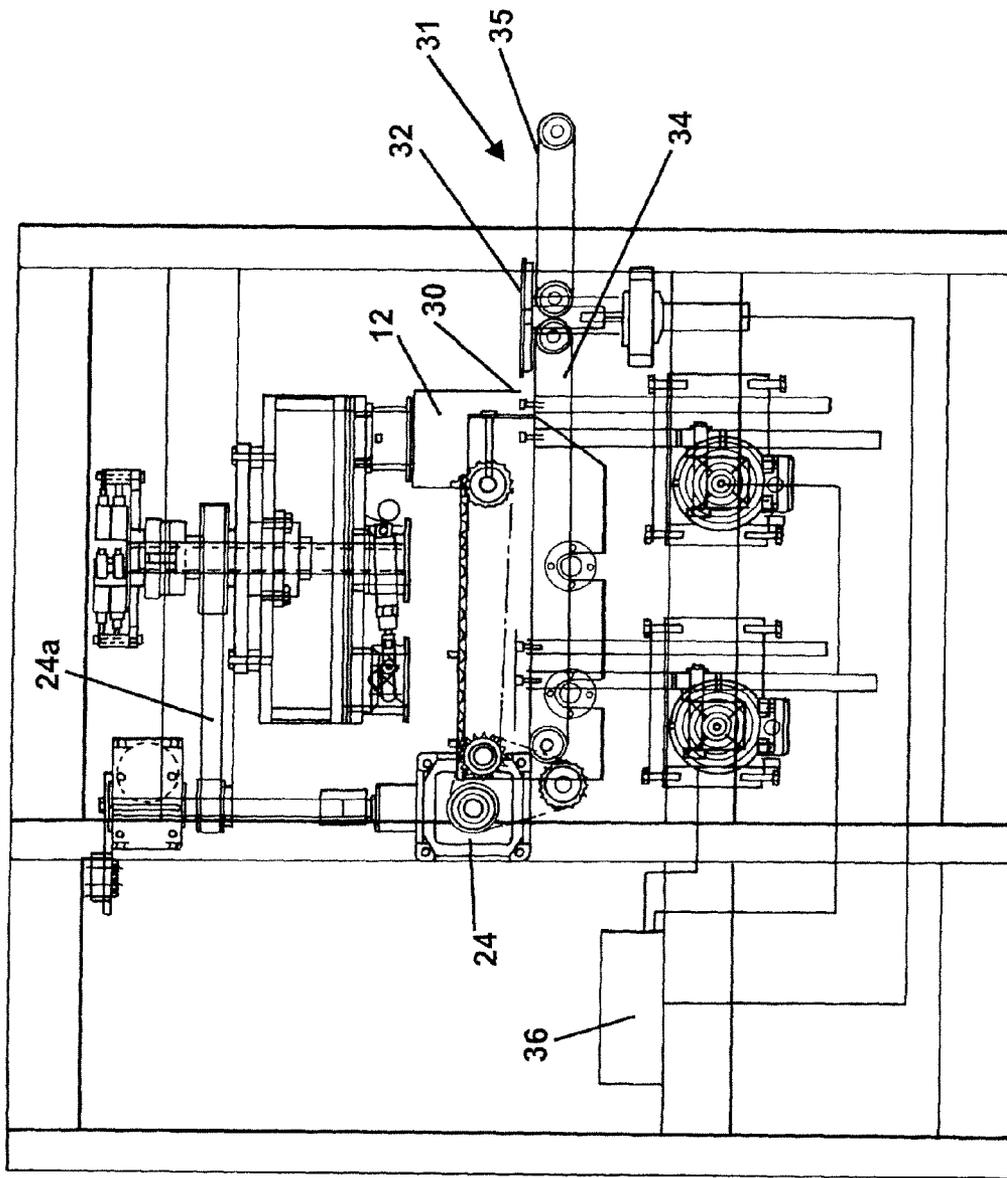


Fig. 2

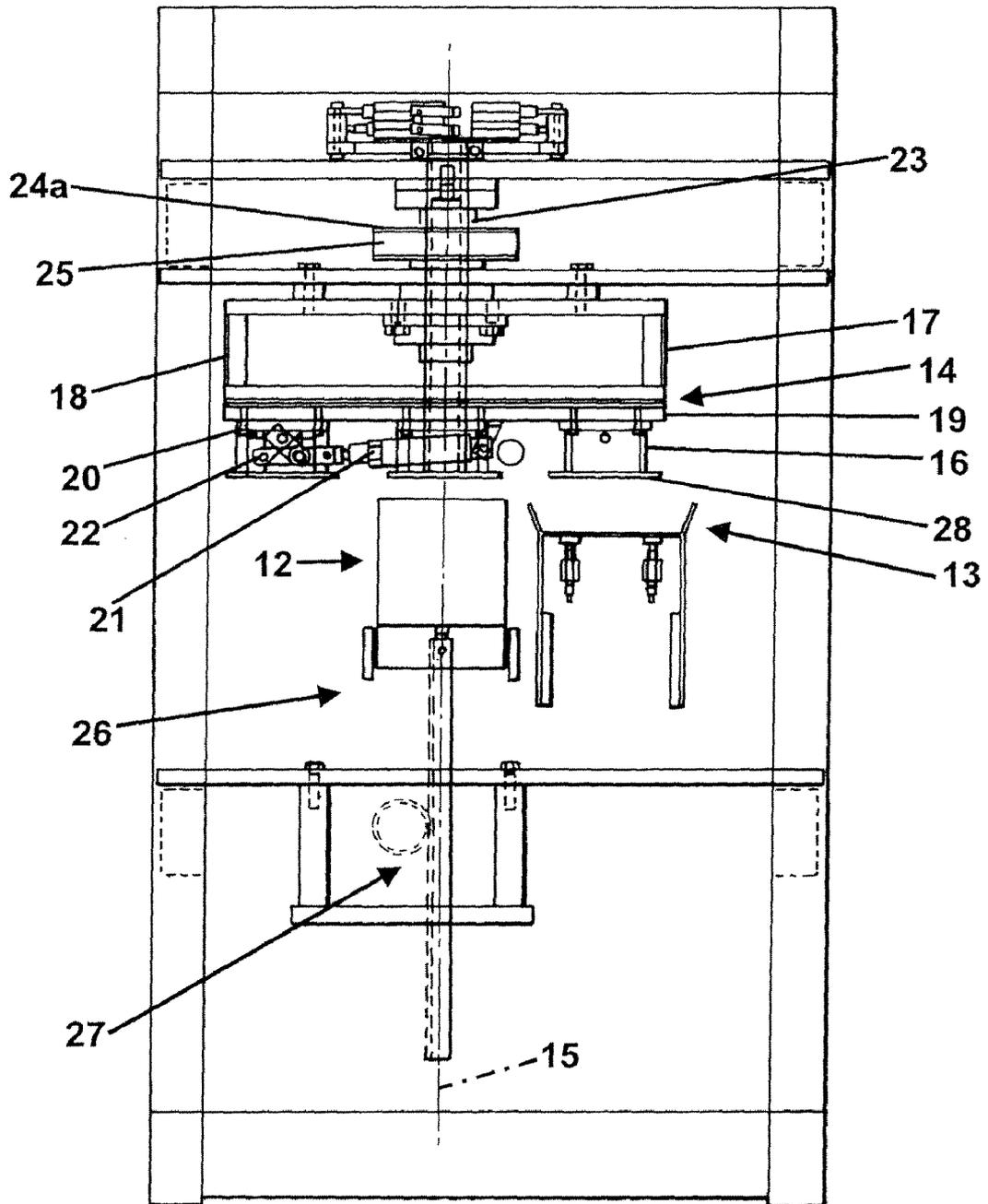


Fig. 3

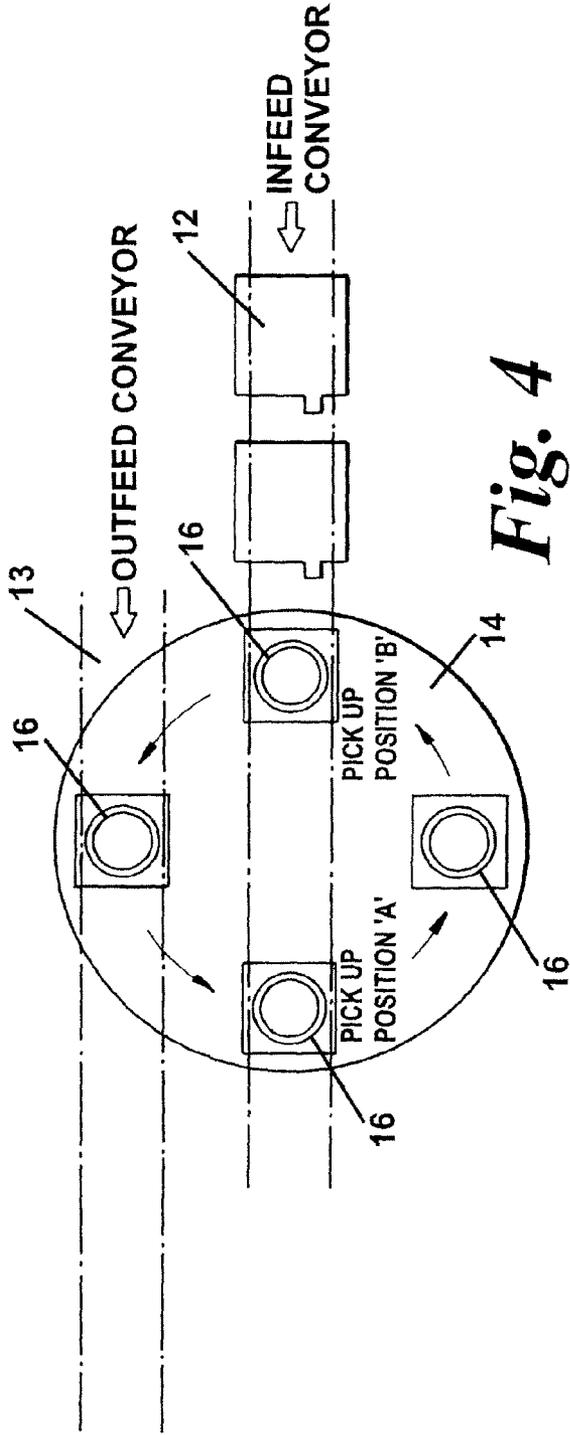


Fig. 4

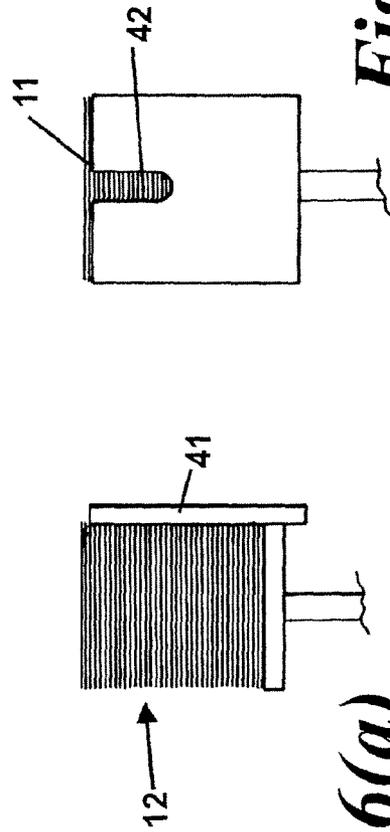


Fig. 6(a)

Fig. 6(b)

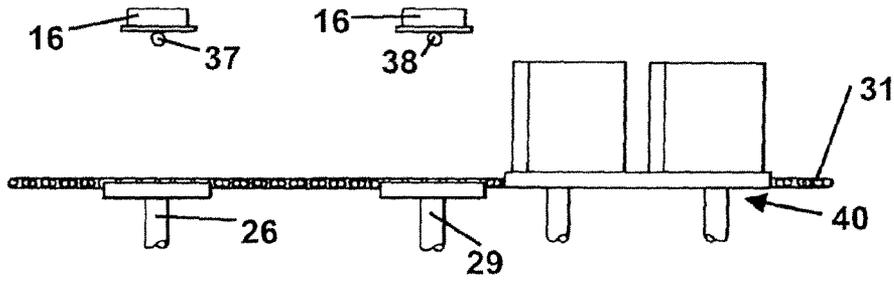


Fig. 5(a)

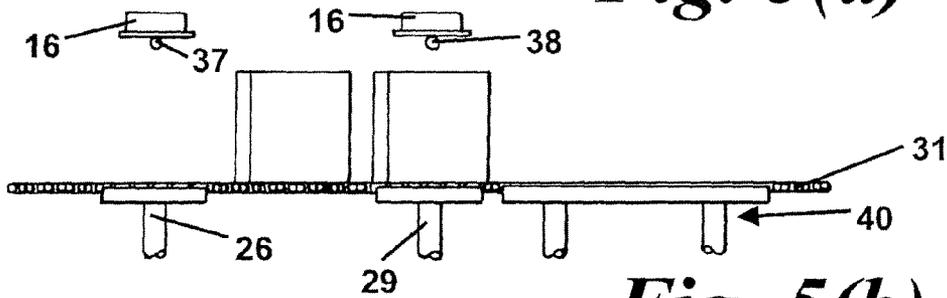


Fig. 5(b)

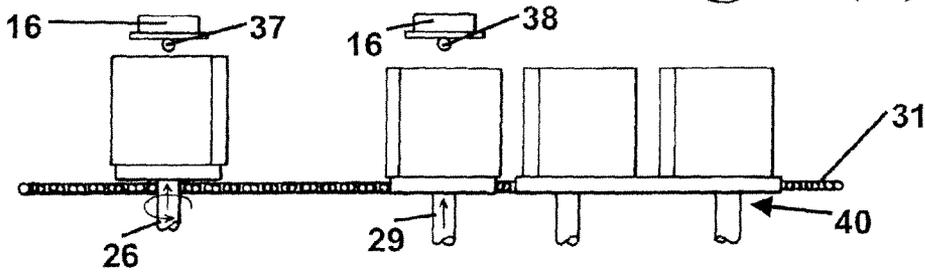


Fig. 5(c)

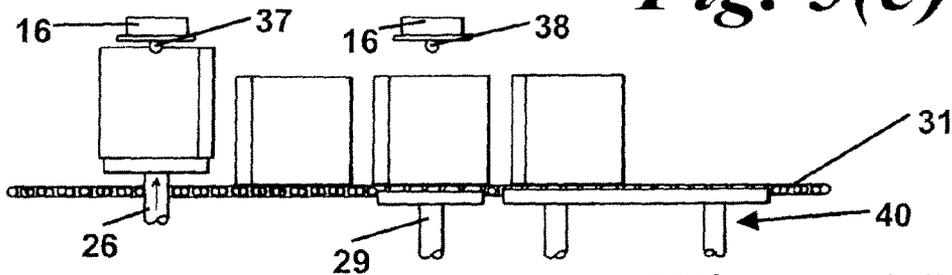


Fig. 5(d)

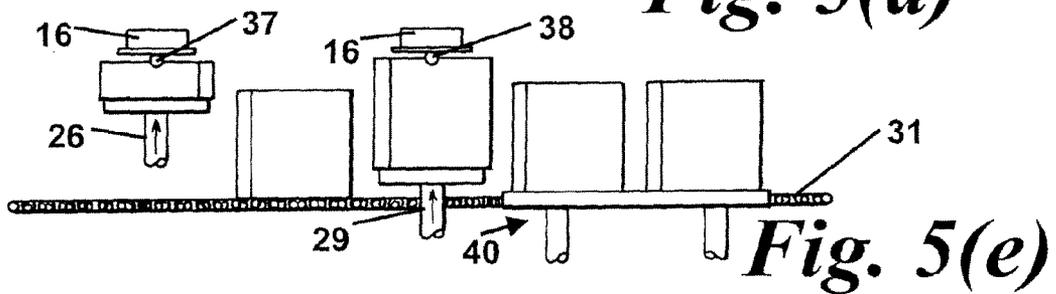


Fig. 5(e)

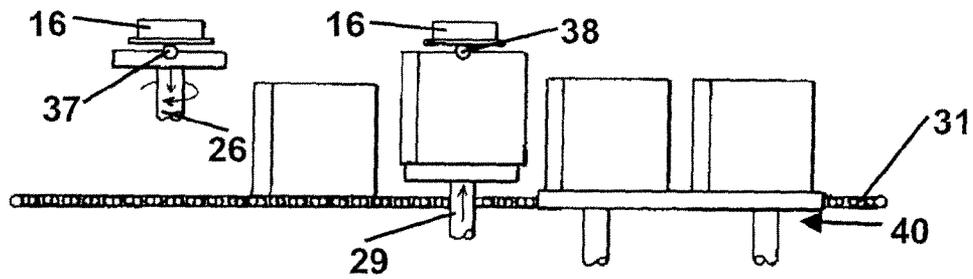


Fig. 5(f)

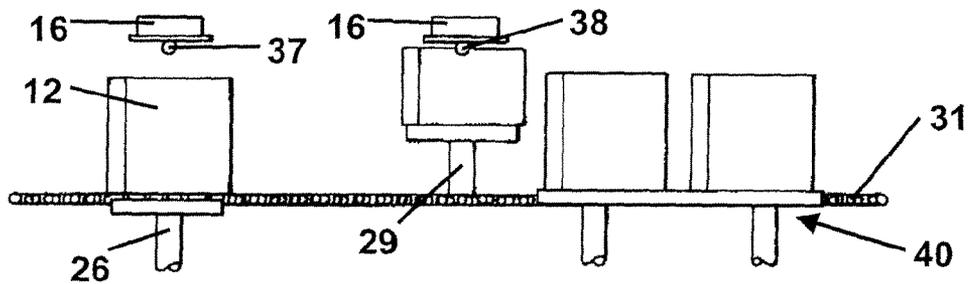


Fig. 5(i)

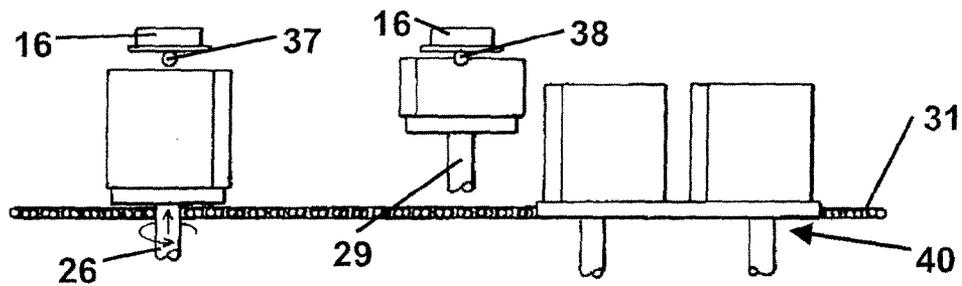


Fig. 5(j)

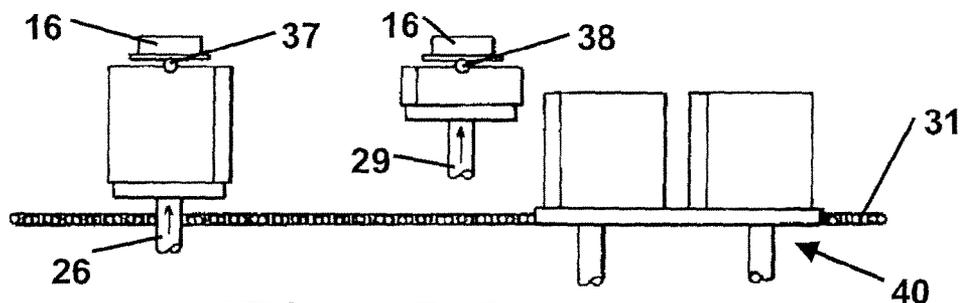


Fig. 5(k)

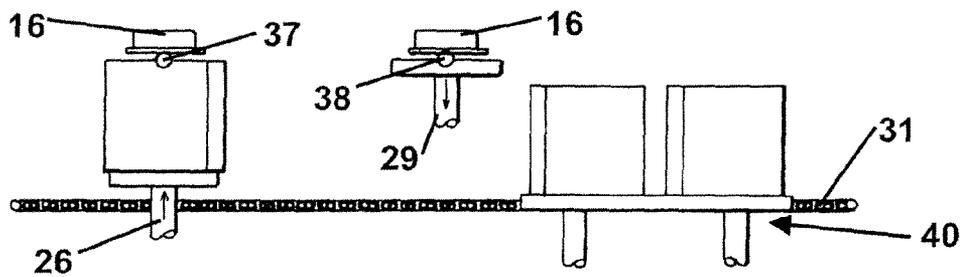


Fig. 5(l)

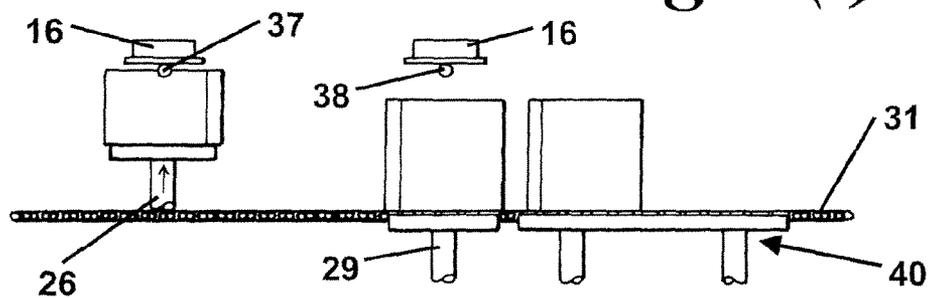


Fig. 5(m)

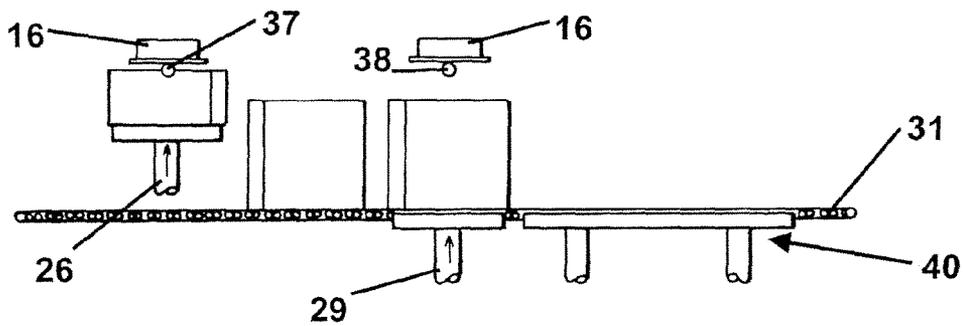


Fig. 5(n)

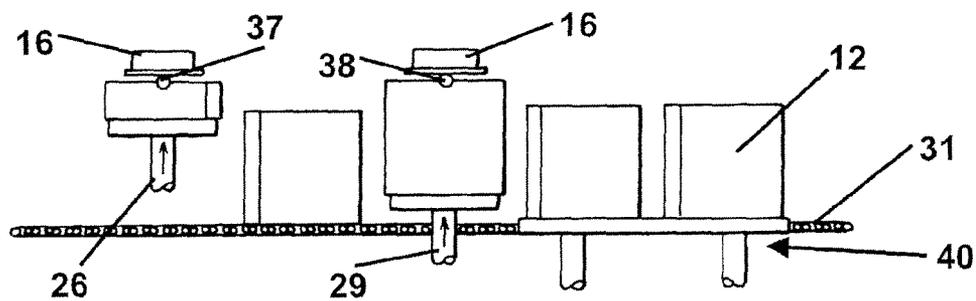


Fig. 5(o)

APPARATUS FOR PLACING BATTERY PLATES

This invention relates to apparatus for placing battery plates in a line from one or more stacks of plates.

It is well known, during the manufacture of batteries containing battery plates to have to take battery plates from stacks, formed when the batteries are moulded, and to lay them into a line for subsequent handling, when they are formed into groups with separators and properly orientated terminals. In recent years many parts of the assembly line have been speeded up and there is a need for apparatus which can perform this function at high speed. With this in mind, arrangements such as are illustrated in U.S. Pat. Nos. 4,784,380 and 6,971,838 have been developed where multiple in line heads pick up battery plates from respective stacks and then deliver them onto a conveyor. By mounting these heads in line on a rocking or translatable carrier five or so plates can be deposited simultaneously, in line, on a conveyor. These systems have been found to have speed limitations, which do not enable them to meet the requirements of a modern line.

A further problem, which is recognised in U.S. Pat. No. 6,971,838, arises from the porous nature of many plates which now need to be handled and the need to ensure that only one plate is being picked up at a time.

From one aspect the invention consists in apparatus for placing battery plates in a line from a stack of plates, including an elevator for receiving a stack of plates and sequentially elevating the stack to maintain, in use, the uppermost plate in the stack in a datum range lying between two parallel generally horizontal planes and a plurality of vacuum heads for sequentially passing over the elevator with a fixed gap from the upper plane of the datum range for picking up the uppermost plate and for subsequently releasing the plate at a release position.

The applicants have realised that, surprisingly, they can create apparatus capable of much higher speeds from a single stack, rather than taking the plates from a multiplicity of in line stacks. This is because with the vacuum heads arranged in a loop there is not the same requirement for acceleration and deceleration as occurs in the earlier design. Further, by having an elevator which places the uppermost plate in a predetermined datum region, the geometry of the relationship between the position of the plate and the vacuum head can be particularly simply designed, with the result that no contact is required between the plate and the vacuum head. This prevents damage to the plates which can occur if a plate is drawn across the top of the one beneath it as has been seen with other plate handling systems that wipe the plates from the stack.

In a preferred embodiment the apparatus further includes a carrier rotatable about a generally vertical axis, in which case the vacuum heads may be mounted on the carrier and spaced around the axis.

There may be an evacuable plenum, which may also be mounted on the carrier, and in this case each vacuum head may be connectable to the plenum by a respective valve. A control may be provided for opening a valve associated with a head as the head approaches the elevator and for closing the valve when the head is in the release position.

Conveniently an output conveyor extends beneath the release position for receiving the release plates.

An input conveyor for delivering stacks of plates to the elevator may also be provided.

There may be a plurality of elevators moveable between an inactive position where a stack can be received and an active position. Conveniently there can be two elevators arranged diametrically relative to the axis, in which case the apparatus

includes an input conveyor extending along the diameter. The apparatus may further include a turntable for rotating a stack before it is fed to one of the conveyors and preferably that one conveyor is the most downstream conveyor. Conveniently an elevator can perform the role of a turntable.

This turntable enables the stacks to be orientated in an appropriate position for their elevator so that, when released, the plates in the line have a common orientation.

From another aspect the invention consists in apparatus for placing battery plates in a line from stacks of plates including a plurality of vacuum heads for picking up, in a pick-up position a top most plate from a stack and subsequently releasing it at a release position and a carrier for carrying the heads and moving them between the pick-up and release positions, wherein in the pick-up position there is a space, in use, between the uppermost plate and the associated vacuum head, whereby the plates moves to the head.

Although the invention has been defined above it is to be understood that it includes any inventive combination of the features set out above or in the following description.

The invention may be performed in various ways and a specific embodiment will now be described, by way of example with reference to the accompanying drawings in which:

FIG. 1 is a plan view of apparatus for placing battery plates in a line from a stack of plates:

FIG. 2 is a view of the apparatus of FIG. 1 on the Arrow A; and

FIG. 3 is an end view of the apparatus in the direction B;

FIG. 4 is a schematic view from above of the carrier of the apparatus of FIG. 1;

FIG. 5(a) to (o) indicate a supply sequence to the carrier of FIG. 4 and;

FIGS. 6(a) and (b) are respective side and front views of an elevator location.

Referring to FIGS. 1 to 3, apparatus generally indicated at 10, is provided for taking plates 11 from a stack 12 and depositing them sequentially in line on a conveyor 13. The apparatus 10 includes a carrier 14 rotatable about a vertically extending axis 15, which carries a number of vacuum heads 16, which are spaced circumferentially around the carrier 14. The carrier also carries a box 17 that defines an evacuable plenum 18, which is on the one hand connected to a vacuum source (not shown) and on the other hand communicates with respective heads 16 via tubes 19 that are open and closed by respective butterfly valves, one of which is shown at 20. The valves 20 can be moved between open and closed positions, for example by the ram 21 and toggle actuator 22. A motor 24, is provided for rotating the carrier on a shaft 23 in the direction of the Arrow C by means of a pulley 24a and belt 25.

As can be seen in FIG. 3 the stack 12 is mounted on an elevator 26, which can be raised and lowered by means of a rack and pinion arrangement indicated at 27.

In its simplest form of operation, the carrier 14 is rotated and as a particular head 16 approaches the elevator 26, its butterfly valve 20 is opened connecting the head 16 to the source of vacuum by means of the plenum 18. As the "on" head 16 passes over the uppermost plate 11 in the stack it lifts the plate onto the vacuum head 16 whereupon it is carried, from this pick-up position over the elevator 26 to a release position over the conveyor 13. At that point the butterfly valve 20 is closed, removing the vacuum and releasing the plate 11 to drop onto the conveyor 13.

It is preferred, particularly when porous plates have been handled, that the mouth 28 is relatively large and the vacuum source and plenum are arranged so as to encourage fairly high air flow, but low vacuum. This is because as ingressing air

sweeps across the surface of the uppermost plate it tends to cause an aerodynamic lift separating the uppermost plate from the stack, and enabling it to be captured by a low vacuum and reducing the chance of more than one plate **11** being picked up at once.

Because the carrier **14** is constantly rotating, without any need for deceleration, it can be rotated at high speeds, with the result that, even though only one plate is being picked up at a time, plates can be delivered onto the conveyor at rates at least up to 200 plates per minute.

It will be understood that in order to benefit significantly from such high delivery rates, it is desirable to have a system for replenishing the stack as quickly as possible. The applicants have arranged for this conveniently by providing a second elevator **29**, which is located diametrically opposite the first elevator **12**, so that whilst one elevator is in an active position from which plates can be picked up, the other elevator can be in an inactive position in which it can receive a fresh stack of plates. Because the elevators **26** and **29** are opposite each other, it is necessary to ensure that the stacks provided are orientated so that the stacks provided to one elevator are 180° rotated as compared with those provided to the other elevator. This can be achieved in a number of ways one of which is illustrated in the drawings. Here a conveyor system generally indicated at **31** brings stacks **12** sequentially to a turntable **32** that can be elevated through the plane of the conveyor system **31** to temporarily retain a stack **12** and, if necessary rotate it.

If elevator **12** is in the active position and plates are being removed from it, then elevator **30** should be in its inactive lowered position beneath the plane of the conveyor system **31**. The turntable **32** will then rotate through 180° a first stack that it has received, lower those back onto the conveyor system **31** so that they are fed into a buffer position **33**, beneath the shaft **23**. As it will be noted that the conveyor system **31** is formed by two aligned conveyors **34** and **35**. It will be understood that the rotated stack **12a** can be retained in the buffer position by pausing the conveyor **34**. The turntable **32** can then either stay lowered and simply allow the next stack to pass onto the elevator **30**, which can capture the stack by passing up through the plane of the conveyor system **31** or it can retain it temporarily so that it can release the stack with position timing to meet the elevator **32** as it rises. When the elevator **26** has been emptied, the elevator **30** then rises up into its active position and plates are picked up from there so that there is no gap in the provision of the plates. It may be desirable to adjust the rotational speed of the carrier at least momentarily, because the elevator **30** is a shorter distance from the conveyor **13** than the elevator **12** and it will usually be desirable for there to be equal spacing between the plates **11**. A similar effect could be achieved by varying the speed of the conveyor **13**.

A control **36** is provided for controlling the motor, the valves and the various conveyors and elevators in accordance with the operational protocol described above. A means of controlling such elements would be well understood by one skilled in the art.

Variations on this design are described with reference FIGS. **4** to **6**. FIGS. **4** and **5** show an arrangement, which deals with a problem that can arise using the previously described apparatus. As proposed in that apparatus plates are initially picked up by the nozzle **16** which is in pick up position A and when the associated stack **12** is used up the pick up or nozzle at **16** at position B begins to lift plates **11** from its associated stack **12**. It has been found that if one waits until the last plate is lifted from elevator **26** before lifting elevator **29**, then a space tends to occur between plates laid on out feed conveyor

13 because the nozzle instantaneously lying between A and B, which has passed over an empty stack, arrives at B before a plate is ready to pick up.

FIGS. **5(a)** to **(o)** show a sequence of plate feeding, which overcomes this problem and introduces a slightly different approach to the alignment of lugs issue. Looking at FIG. **5(a)** first, it will be noted that pick up positions A and B have respective sensors **37,38** for detecting the presence or absence of a plate **11** in the datum region from which a plate is picked up. The sensors **37,38**, which are typically lasers that can be reflected in the absence of a plate in the datum region, are connected to the control **36** and in particular are used to control respective elevators **26** and **29**. A further, double sized, elevator **40** is provided upstream of the elevator **29** in association with the feed conveyor **31**.

Thus in FIG. **5(a)** stacks **1** and **2** have been moved onto the elevator **40** by the in feed conveyor **31** and can be retained in that position by the elevator **40** lifting them clear of the conveyor **31**. In FIG. **5(b)** the stacks have been released by the conveyor **40** and moved downstream. Stack **2** lies above the elevator **29** and can be captured in that position by the elevator **29** lifting it clear of the conveyor bed. This can be seen in FIG. **5(c)**. The stack **1** has now reached elevator **26**, which in this embodiment is configured as a turntable. Elevator **26** rotates the stack so that the lugs on the plates **11** will be suitably orientated and in the meantime further stacks **3** and **4** are delivered onto the elevator **40**. In FIG. **5(d)** elevator **26** lifts stack **1** so that plates are removed one by one, as previously described from stack **1**, and released onto the conveyor **13**. The sensor **37** detects the presence or absence of the top plate and controls the advancement of the elevator **26**. In the meantime stack **2** has been released by elevator **29** to move into a buffer position intermediate elevators **26** and **29** and stack **3** has moved to a position in which it can be captured by the elevator **29**.

It can be seen in FIG. **5(e)** that the majority of the plates have now been removed from stack **1**, but at this time stack **3** is elevated so that plates can be taken from it by a pick up in position B. In this way that stack is ready for having plates removed before stack **1** is finished, ie. both elevators are in an active position for an overlap period. By suitably controlling the valves on the pick up heads or nozzles **16**, a continuous stream of plates can be achieved.

In Figure **(f)** stack **3** is now producing all of the plates to be passed on to the conveyor **13**, whilst empty elevator **26** descends and returns to its original rotational orientation. As can be seen in FIG. **5(i)** stack **2** then feeds onto elevator **26** and is rotated at **(j)**. In FIG. **5(k)** stack **2** is now elevated by elevator **26**, because it is detected that stack **3** has been substantially used up. At **(l)** stack **2** has taken over as the feed stack and at **(m)** stacks **4** and **5** are being used to replenish. By FIG. **5(o)** the apparatus has sequenced so that it corresponds with FIG. **5(e)**.

It will thus be seen that this approach handles both the issue of lug orientation and providing a continuous uninterrupted supply of plates to the conveyor **13**.

FIG. **6** shows an additional improvement which can be made. This is the provision of a stop plate **41** which can retain the stack **12** against any wiping drag, as the top plate **11** is removed. A vertical partial notch **42** is provided to allow the sensor to detect the presence or absence of plates.

Finally, it has been found, from the control point of view, that it is particularly efficacious to control the valves via one or more server motors.

It will be appreciated that the design could be varied in a number of other ways while still achieving the broad benefits of the invention. Thus the vacuum heads could be mounted on

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a chain conveyor or the like and do not necessarily have to follow a circular path. However, the use of a circular carrier enables the applicant to achieve a particularly small footprint compared, for example, with the in-line machines mentioned in the acknowledged prior art. The elevators could be individually fed laterally and the turntable could be in the buffer position, rather than the position in which it is described. The invention thus covers any such variations or others clear to a person skilled in the art which fall within the scope of the attached claims.

The invention claimed is:

1. Apparatus for placing battery plates in a line from a stack of plates including an elevator for receiving a stack of plates and sequentially elevating the stack to maintain, in use, the uppermost plate in the stack in a datum region lying between two parallel generally horizontal planes and a plurality of vacuum heads arranged in a closed loop for sequentially passing over the elevator with a fixed gap from the upper plane of the datum range for picking up the uppermost plate and for subsequently releasing the plate at a release position, wherein the elevator is one of a plurality of elevators moveable between an inactive position and an active position, and further comprising at least one buffer elevator for temporarily halting travel of a stack along an input conveyor.

2. Apparatus as claimed in claim 1 further including a carrier rotatable about a generally vertical axis and wherein the vacuum heads are mounted on the carrier and spaced around the axis.

3. Apparatus as claimed in claim 2 further including an evacuable plenum and wherein each vacuum head is connectable to the plenum by a respective valve.

4. Apparatus as claimed in claim 3 further including a control for opening a valve, associated with a head, as the head approaches the elevator and for closing the valve when the head is the release position.

5. Apparatus as claimed in claim 1 including an output conveyor extending beneath the release position.

6. Apparatus as claimed in claim 1 including an input conveyor for delivering stacks of plates to the elevator.

7. Apparatus as claimed in claim 1 wherein only one elevator can be in an active position at any one time.

8. Apparatus as claimed in claim 2 wherein there are two elevators moveable between an inactive position and an active position, the two elevators arranged diametrically relative to the axis and the apparatus including an input conveyor extending along the diameter of the carrier.

9. Apparatus as claimed in claim 1 wherein two elevators can be active during an overlap period.

10. Apparatus as claimed in claim 9 wherein there are two input elevators arranged diametrically relative to a vertical axis and the apparatus including an input conveyor extending along the axis.

11. Apparatus as claimed in claim 1 further including a turntable for rotating a stack.

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12. Apparatus as claimed in claim 11 wherein the turntable is an elevator.

13. Apparatus as claimed in claim 9 wherein the one conveyor is the most downstream conveyor.

14. Apparatus for placing battery plates in a line from a stack of plates including an elevator for receiving a stack of plates and sequentially elevating the stack to maintain, in use, the uppermost plate in the stack in a datum region lying between two parallel generally horizontal planes, a plurality of vacuum heads arranged in a closed loop for sequentially passing over the elevator with a fixed gap from the upper plane of the datum range for picking up the uppermost plate and for subsequently releasing the plate at a release position, and a turntable for rotating a stack.

15. Apparatus as claimed in claim 14 further including a carrier rotatable about a generally vertical axis and wherein the vacuum heads are mounted on the carrier and spaced around the axis.

16. Apparatus as claimed in claim 15 further including an evacuable plenum and wherein each vacuum head is connectable to the plenum by a respective valve.

17. Apparatus as claimed in claim 16 further including a control for opening a valve, associated with a head, as the head approaches the elevator and for closing the valve when the head is the release position.

18. Apparatus as claimed in claim 14 including an output conveyor extending beneath the release position.

19. Apparatus as claimed in claim 14 including an input conveyor for delivering stacks of plates to the elevator.

20. Apparatus as claimed in claim 14 including a plurality of elevators movable between an inactive position and an active position.

21. Apparatus as claimed in claim 20 wherein only one elevator can be in an active position at any one time.

22. Apparatus as claimed in claim 15 wherein there are two elevators moveable between an inactive position and an active position, the two elevators arranged diametrically relative to the axis and the apparatus including an input conveyor extending along the diameter of the carrier.

23. Apparatus as claimed in claim 20 wherein two elevators can be active during an overlap period.

24. Apparatus as claimed in claim 23 wherein there are two input elevators arranged diametrically relative to a vertical axis and the apparatus including an input conveyor extending along the axis.

25. Apparatus as claimed in claim 20 wherein including at least one buffer elevator for temporarily halting travel of a stack along an input conveyor.

26. Apparatus as claimed in claim 14 wherein the turntable is an elevator.

27. Apparatus as claimed in claim 23 wherein the one conveyor is the most downstream conveyor.

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